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STILL SPELLBOUND

CIA

A sophisticated account of the Kennedy years that does not feign dispassion

By Michael Harrington

A THOUSAND DAYS: John F. Kennedy in the White House. By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Houghton Mifflin. 1,087 pp. \$9.

For Americans, November 22, 1963, is not yet history. It still hurts too much.

Thus, as Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., well understands in *A Thousand Days*, it is not yet possible even to pretend to dispassion. Some young historian of the future, he says, will attempt to regain the "Presidential perspective," that view of the whole which John F. Kennedy had intended to record in his own memoirs. But this generation of chroniclers still lives within the political and emotional spell of the fallen leader. The past they analyze is still very much the present and thus in fragments (for example, Schlesinger's own White House experiences weight his book toward the foreign policy issues in which he was personally involved).

And still, *A Thousand Days* is a permanent and indispensable contribution to the understanding of the Kennedy Administration. It is rare that a brilliant scholar is himself an original historical source or that he has an eye for personality as well as massive trends. Schlesinger is certainly a Kennedy partisan, but he is not an apologist, and, above all, he writes politically about politics, a virtue which eludes many in his profession.

In *A Thousand Days*, John F. Kennedy emerges as a man who restored the youth, excitement and rationality of the young Republic to the mature nation, and who provided the world with the vision of a leader who "understood the terror and the hope, the diversity and the possibility, of life on this planet." I share much of this conclusion. If I state it with the qualifications and criticisms of the outsider, I have the same feeling that, with John F. Kennedy, this country changed for the better. While living in Europe in 1963, I had decided to break with my radical orthodoxy and vote for Kennedy in 1964. I heard the terrible news in a Milan restaurant. And even now, while trying to be an objective reviewer, it is that sense of loss which is my true point of departure.

But to attempt the return to history, turn first to John F. Kennedy as Commander-in-Chief.

Unquestionably, the late President's flexible military policy represented a gain over the apocalyptic and dangerous posturing of the "massive retaliation" doctrine. And certainly Secretary of Defense McNamara won a memorable victory over the uniformed section.

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